

The Living Covenant: Ecological Balance, Dharma, and the Ethics of Interbeing in Vandana Shiva, Indigenous Indian Lores, and Buddhist Philosophy

Minakshi Prasad Mishra

Assistant Professor

Assistant Professor, OTR, Bhubaneswar, Department of Humanities, School of Basic Sciences and Humanities, Odisha University of Technology & Research

Orchid Id: 0009-0002-4192-2979

email id: Minakshiprasadmishra@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper undertakes a sustained interdisciplinary reading of ecological balance as a form of ethical and cosmological practice through the convergent frameworks of dharma, Indigenous Indian ecological lore, and Buddhist philosophy. Drawing primarily on Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist critiques—particularly *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), *Monocultures of the Mind* (1993), and *Soil Not Oil* (2008)—alongside oral and textual traditions from Adivasi and other Indigenous communities in the Indian subcontinent, the essay argues that ecological balance is not merely a biophysical condition but a dharmic obligation rooted in cosmological interdependence. The Buddhist analytical lens, particularly the Theravada doctrine of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*) and the Mahayana concept of *pratityasamutpada* as elaborated by Nagarjuna, provides the metaphysical scaffolding through which Indigenous and Shivian ecological ethics can be rigorously examined. By reading these traditions in productive dialogue rather than in false equivalence, the paper contends that ecological devastation is simultaneously a crisis of dharma—a rupture in relational obligation—and an epistemic violence that erases the ecological knowledges of communities who have long theorized and practised sustainability not as a policy goal but as a way of being in the world.

I. Introduction: The Wound in the World

To speak of ecological balance today is to speak of its catastrophic absence. The rivers run thinner, the forests thin further, the coastlines remember what the development maps have chosen to forget. And yet the crisis of ecology is not, as the dominant narratives of environmentalism would have it, a recent emergency requiring techno-scientific remedy. It is, rather, an ancient wound inflicted by a particular historical formation—colonial capitalism—that violently reorganised the earth and the epistemologies through which human beings understood their obligations to it. Vandana Shiva, perhaps the most globally visible voice in Indian ecological thought, has argued with characteristic force and clarity that what we witness in the desertification of farmlands, the contamination of aquifers, and the dispossession of forest communities is not the collateral damage of progress but its very logic. In *Staying Alive*, she writes that the paradigm of development has been a project of maldevelopment, one that treats nature as raw material and women and Indigenous peoples as disposable labour rather than as primary ecological agents (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 2).

But Shiva does not speak in a vacuum. Her work draws, consciously and generously, from a dense tradition of Indian ecological thought that precedes her by millennia: the Vedic vision of *Prakriti* as sacred Nature, the Bishnoi community's theology of non-violence toward trees, the Adivasi cosmologies that refuse the separation of forest and family, the Chipko women who embraced the trees with their bodies in 1974 and in doing so recovered a philosophy that scholars of English literature can only call, inadequately, *ecocentric*. What this paper proposes to do is read these traditions through a Buddhist philosophical lens—specifically through the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*) and its Mahayana elaboration in Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*—not in order to reduce them to a single metaphysical system, but to reveal the structural and ethical homologies between them: the insistence that no being is self-arising, that all life is relational, and that ecological destruction is therefore a form of moral violence against the very grammar of existence.

The argument proceeds in five movements. The first locates ecological balance within Shiva's theoretical framework and its grounding in concepts of dharma drawn from Sankhya philosophy and feminist materialism. The second turns to Indigenous Indian lores—particularly from Adivasi communities of Odisha, the Gonds, the Santals, and the Bishnoi of Rajasthan—to examine how ecological obligation has been encoded in myth, ritual, and social practice. The third brings Buddhist philosophy into productive conversation with these traditions, tracing the concept of *pratityasamutpada* as an ecological metaphysics. The fourth section engages the figure of the mother—in Shiva's ecofeminism, in goddess traditions, and in Buddhist representations of the bodhisattva Tara—as the site where ecological ethics and embodied knowledge converge. The final section argues for what I call a dharmic ecology of reading: a critical practice that holds together the literary, the philosophical, the political,

and the material in its account of the ecological emergency.

II. Vandana Shiva and the Dharmic Earth: Prakriti, Maldevelopment, and the Ethics of Wholeness

Vandana Shiva's ecological philosophy is most productively understood not as environmentalism in the liberal Western sense—that is, as a set of policy prescriptions for the management of natural resources—but as a dharmic philosophy of relationality. The Sanskrit concept of dharma, which bears the weight of meanings that include cosmic order, moral duty, righteous conduct, and the fundamental nature of things, is not incidental to Shiva's argument but central to it. In *Staying Alive*, she establishes from the outset that the ecological crisis is a crisis of the masculine in its most alienated, dualistic form: the form that constructs nature as inert matter to be conquered, women as passive bodies to be controlled, and Indigenous knowledge as superstition to be superseded. Against this, she recovers the concept of Prakriti—the feminine principle of nature in Sankhya philosophy—not as a romantic regression but as an alternative ontology of agency, activity, and abundance.

Prakriti, Shiva argues, is not passive nature waiting to be acted upon by the Purusha of Western science. She is generative principle, the matrix of all becoming. In Sankhya cosmology, the visible world emerges from the dynamic interaction of Prakriti's three gunas—sattva (harmony), rajas (activity), and tamas (inertia)—and ecological balance is precisely the condition in which these forces are in creative equilibrium. Ecological destruction, in this framework, is not simply an empirical problem but a metaphysical one: a disruption of the dharmic balance through which life sustains itself. Shiva's reading of the Chipko movement—the women-led tree-hugging protest in the Garhwal Himalayas—illustrates this clearly. When Gaura Devi led the women of Reni village to embrace the trees in 1974, stopping the axes of the forest contractors, she was not performing an act of sentimentality. She was asserting a dharmic claim: that the forest was not commodity but community, not resource but kin (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 67-68).

In *Monocultures of the Mind*, Shiva extends this critique to the epistemological domain. The green revolution, she argues, did not merely change what farmers grew; it annihilated the diversity of what they knew. The replacement of hundreds of indigenous seed varieties with a handful of high-yielding monocultures was simultaneously an ecological impoverishment and a cognitive one—an erasure of the relational, place-based knowledge through which farmers, particularly women, had sustained biodiversity for generations. This is what Shiva means by the monoculture of the mind: the reduction of the epistemological commons to the single logic of the market, the conversion of living knowledge into intellectual property. The dharmic dimension of this critique is important: the knowledge that is erased is not merely useful information but a form of ethical relation, a way of attending to the particularities of soil, seed, season, and watershed that constitutes, in its very practice, a form of reverence.

Soil Not Oil, written in the context of the converging crises of climate change and peak oil, further sharpens Shiva's argument. She contends that the industrial food system, built on fossil fuel inputs and oriented toward global commodity markets, is not simply unsustainable in a technical sense; it is fundamentally adharmic—it violates the circular economy of the earth, replacing it with a linear economy of extraction and waste. The soil, she insists, is not a substrate for chemical agriculture; it is a community of billions of living organisms whose collective intelligence sustains fertility, regulates water, and sequesters carbon. To treat the soil as dead matter is to commit an ontological error with catastrophic consequences. The recovery of ecological balance, in Shiva's vision, requires a return to what she calls the living economy: an economy that recognises and sustains the dharma of the earth (Shiva, *Soil Not Oil* 15-17).

What is striking about Shiva's argument, from the perspective of a literary and cultural scholar, is its rhetorical as well as philosophical force. She writes across genres—the activist manifesto, the scholarly treatise, the testimony, the elegy—and her prose carries the authority of both the laboratory and the village. But it is also important to read Shiva critically: her ecofeminism has been charged, not always unfairly, with a tendency toward essentialism, a risk of naturalising the association between women and nature that patriarchy itself has historically deployed. These critiques, articulated most forcefully by scholars such as Bina Agarwal, deserve to be held alongside Shiva's insights rather than used to dismiss them (Agarwal 119-148). The question is not whether women are intrinsically ecological—they are not—but whether the specific social positions that women occupy in agrarian economies give them forms of knowledge and practice that are genuinely valuable for ecological thinking. On this more cautious reading, Shiva's work remains indispensable.

III. Indigenous Indian Lores: Forest, Kinship, and the Grammar of Obligation

To turn from Vandana Shiva to the Indigenous ecological traditions of the Indian subcontinent is to move from the scholarly monograph to the oral archive, from the analytical proposition to the living myth—and to encounter a body of knowledge whose sophistication has been systematically undervalued by both colonial administration and post-colonial development policy. The Adivasi communities of India—a term that encompasses diverse groups including the Santals, Mundas, Gonds, Bhils, Kondhs, and the many smaller communities of the forests and hills—do not have a word for nature as something separate from human life, because the separation itself is the category they refuse. In the cosmological architecture of these traditions, the forest, the river, the mountain, and the animal are not backdrop to human drama but participants in it: kin, ancestors, deities, and moral agents.

Among the Santal communities of Jharkhand and Odisha, the *Jaher*—the sacred grove—is the ritual and

ecological heart of community life. The Jaher is not simply a forest; it is the dwelling place of the bonga spirits, the ancestors, and the divine forces that sustain community wellbeing. To cut a tree in the Jaher is not an act of resource extraction but a violation of kinship, an act of violence against the community's spiritual and ecological commons. The botanical diversity of the Jaher—maintained over generations through a complex system of ritual prohibition, communal governance, and sacred ecology—represents what contemporary conservation biology might call a biodiversity hotspot, but what the Santals understand as a living covenant between the human and the more-than-human community. Nirmal Sengupta's work on Santal water management documents how these cosmological convictions translate into sophisticated practices of watershed protection, seasonal burning, and forest regeneration (Sengupta 83-109). This is ecological knowledge encoded in the idiom of obligation rather than utility.

The Gond communities of central India, whose mythology is preserved in the Pardhan bardic tradition, offer another register of Indigenous ecological thought. The Gond creation narrative, as documented by the ethnomusicologist Verrier Elwin and more recently by the writer and activist Ganesh Devy, narrates the world's emergence from the primordial union of Bara Deo (the great god) and the earth goddess Dharti Mata. In this narrative, the human community is born from the earth as its children, and their dharma is therefore defined by filial obligation: to care for the earth as one cares for a mother. The Gond concept of patta-patta—the kinship of leaf with leaf, of each plant with every other—is not metaphor but ontology: it describes a world in which relationality is the fundamental condition of existence. Devy has argued powerfully that the destruction of Gond forests by the industrial timber economy is not merely an ecological catastrophe but a mythological one: the destruction of a world that was held together by the stories through which the Gond community understood its place in the cosmos (Devy 76-80).

Perhaps the most celebrated example of Indigenous ecological philosophy in the Indian tradition is the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, whose 29 (bish-noi) precepts, formulated by the guru Jambheshwar in the fifteenth century, constitute what is arguably the oldest codified ecological ethics in the world. The Bishnoi precepts prohibit the cutting of green trees, mandate the protection of all wildlife—particularly the blackbuck antelope, which is considered sacred—and prescribe a way of life in which ecological care is inseparable from spiritual practice. The story of Amrita Devi, who in 1730 gave her life to prevent soldiers from the Maharaja of Jodhpur from cutting the sacred khejri trees, and inspired 363 other Bishnoi villagers to follow her example in what is recognised as the first recorded act of nonviolent environmental martyrdom, is not merely historical fact but living dharma: a model of ecological obligation that persists in Bishnoi practice to this day (Tucker and Grim 212-214).

What unites these diverse traditions—and this is the point that tends to be lost in the translation of Indigenous knowledge into the analytical frameworks of environmental sociology or conservation biology—is a shared grammar of obligation. Ecological balance, in the Indigenous Indian traditions, is not a natural equilibrium that exists independently of human agency; it is a moral achievement, a condition that must be continuously maintained through the practices of kinship, ritual, and restraint. The sacred grove, the water covenant, the prohibition on killing, the festival that marks the return of the monsoon—these are not superstitions masking ecological common sense; they are ecological common sense expressed in the language of the sacred, because the sacred is the register in which these communities have historically encoded their most serious obligations. To dismiss this language as pre-modern is to commit precisely the epistemological violence that Shiva identifies as the first step in the destruction of the living economy.

IV. Dependent Origination and the Ecology of Emptiness: Buddhist Philosophy as Analytical Lens

The Buddhist philosophical tradition offers, in the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada* in Pali, *pratityasamutpada* in Sanskrit), what may be the most rigorous metaphysical account of ecological interdependence in the history of human thought. The Buddha's formulation in the Pali Canon is deceptively simple: 'When this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases' (*Samyutta Nikaya* II.28). But the implications of this formulation, worked out across centuries of philosophical commentary and elaborated with particular brilliance by Nagarjuna in the second century CE, are nothing less than a complete reconception of the nature of being, identity, and causality.

Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, the foundational text of the Madhyamaka school, argues that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence (*svabhava-sunya*) precisely because they arise in dependence on other phenomena. This is not a nihilist thesis; Nagarjuna explicitly distinguishes his position from the view that things do not exist at all (*Mulamadhyamakakarika* XXIV.18-19). What it denies is the existence of fixed, self-sufficient entities—selves, substances, essences—that could stand apart from the web of causal relations in which they arise. Applied to ecology, the implications are profound. The forest is not a collection of individual trees; it is an event—a process of mutual arising in which the mycorrhizal networks, the rainfall patterns, the insect populations, the soil communities, and the human practices of tending and harvesting all constitute one another. To destroy the forest is therefore not simply to remove a resource; it is to dissolve a relational event, to unmake a world.

The connection between *pratityasamutpada* and ecological thought has been developed by a number of Buddhist philosophers and environmental thinkers in the contemporary period. Joanna Macy, whose work on Buddhist and systems theory provided an early theoretical framework for what she calls ecological self, argues

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that the doctrine of dependent origination is Buddhism's most radical contribution to environmental ethics precisely because it dissolves the ontological boundary between self and world that makes ecological destruction psychologically and morally possible (Macy 53-58). If there is no fixed, isolated self—if the self is, like everything else, an event of mutual arising—then harm to the other is always also harm to oneself, and the obligation to protect the ecological web from which one's own existence is inseparable is not altruism but enlightened self-recognition.

The Theravada tradition offers additional resources in the Jataka tales, in which the future Buddha takes birth across species—as deer, as elephant, as tree spirit, as monkey king—in a series of lives that collectively constitute an education in compassion across the boundaries of species. The Jataka not only challenges the human exceptionalism that underlies most Western environmental ethics; it does so by making the animal and the arboreal perspective morally authoritative. The Nigrodha-miga Jataka, in which the Bodhisatta as a golden deer king volunteers to die in place of a pregnant doe and thereby moves the king to renounce all hunting, is a parable of ecological self-sacrifice that resonates powerfully with the Bishnoi story of Amrita Devi. In both cases, the moral authority of the natural world is affirmed through an act of willing oblation.

The Mahayana concept of the bodhisattva ideal extends this ethics of interdependence into a positive programme of engagement with suffering. The bodhisattva—the being who defers nirvana until all sentient beings are liberated—is, in the ecological reading, a figure of radical ecological solidarity: one who refuses to seek individual salvation from a burning world. Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism, which has been enormously influential in contemporary environmental movements, draws explicitly on this tradition. His concept of interbeing—the recognition that I am in you and you are in me, that the flower is in the cloud and the cloud is in the flower—is both a translation of *pratityasamutpada* into accessible idiom and a practical ethics of ecological care (Nhat Hanh 3-5). The resonances with Shiva's concept of the living economy and with the Indigenous grammar of obligation are not superficial. They point toward a shared recognition that has emerged independently across cultures and traditions: that the illusion of separation is both the metaphysical error and the ecological crime.

It would be a mistake, however, to assimilate Buddhist ecological thought too quickly to a programme of environmental activism, or to read the tradition as uniformly hospitable to ecological concerns. The Buddhist canonical tradition does contain resources for environmental ethics, but it also contains hierarchies of sentience—the traditional privileging of humans over animals, of animals over plants, of plants over the inorganic—that can be made to support anthropocentric positions. Ian Harris's careful scholarship on Buddhism and ecology cautions against the anachronistic appropriation of Buddhist philosophy by contemporary environmentalism, reminding us that the tradition's primary concern is with the liberation of sentient beings from suffering rather than with the preservation of ecosystems as such (Harris 377-402). These cautions are well taken. But they do not invalidate the ecological reading so much as refine it: the question is not whether the Buddha was an environmentalist in the twenty-first century sense, but whether the philosophical resources of the tradition—particularly the doctrine of dependent origination and the ethics of compassion across species—can be brought into productive dialogue with contemporary ecological thinking. The answer, this paper argues, is yes, provided we approach the dialogue with historical and philosophical rigour.

V. The Mother Who Is the World: Ecofeminism, Goddess Traditions, and the Bodhisattva Tara

One of the most powerful sites of convergence between Shiva's ecofeminism, Indigenous Indian ecological lore, and Buddhist philosophy is the figure of the mother—not as a biological category or a domestic role, but as a cosmological principle of generativity, care, and interconnection. In Shiva's work, the figure of Prakriti as Mother Nature is not a metaphor but an ontological claim: the earth is not like a mother; the earth is the matrix of all being, and our relation to it is therefore one of utter dependence and fundamental obligation. This claim finds its echo in the goddess traditions of the Indian subcontinent—in the figure of Bhumi Devi (Earth Goddess), who appears in the Vedic texts as the ground of all life and whose protection is the dharmic obligation of kings and communities; in the Shakta traditions of Bengal and Odisha, where Durga and Kali represent not merely feminine power but the wild, uncontrollable fertility of the natural world; and in the Adivasi worship of Dharti Mata, the earth mother who is simultaneously the source of agricultural abundance and the repository of ancestral memory.

In Odisha—a coastal state whose ecology of forest, river delta, and sea has shaped its cultural imaginary with particular vividness—the goddess tradition carries a distinctly ecological inflection. The worship of Stambhesvari, a tribal deity of the Gond and other communities of western Odisha, is associated with the protection of forest groves and the regulation of hunting through ritual prohibition. The annual festivals that mark the turn of the agricultural seasons are at once rituals of gratitude to the earth for its generosity and practical mechanisms for the management of ecological resources: they determine the timing of planting and harvest, regulate access to common lands and water bodies, and enforce the seasonal bans on fishing that allow fish populations to recover. The sacred and the ecological are here not merely analogous; they are identical. The goddess is the ecology, and the ritual is the management practice.

The Buddhist tradition offers, in the figure of Tara, a counterpart to this goddess ecology that is philosophically rich and historically significant. Tara—whose name is derived from the Sanskrit root *tr*, meaning 'to cross over' or 'to save'—is the bodhisattva of compassionate action, the one who carries beings across the ocean of suffering. In the Tibetan tradition, she is imagined in twenty-one forms, each associated with a different quality of compassionate power. Green Tara, the most widely venerated, is associated with the natural world: her colour

is the colour of living vegetation, and she is invoked for the protection of all living beings from the fears of tigers, elephants, snakes, and other natural forces. The Tibetan Tara theology represents, in effect, a Buddhist ecology of care: an ethics of radical responsiveness to the suffering of all beings, articulated through the figure of a goddess who is herself constituted by the natural world.

Rita Gross's feminist Buddhist scholarship argues that the figure of Tara represents a recovery, within the Buddhist tradition, of the embodied wisdom that patriarchal institutions have historically suppressed (Gross 225-230). This argument resonates with Shiva's claim that the ecological crisis is inseparable from the crisis of the feminine: both the living earth and the knowledge systems of women and Indigenous peoples have been subjected to a colonial appropriation that mistakes their generativity for passivity, their abundance for availability. The recovery of ecological balance requires, on this reading, not merely the adoption of sustainable technologies or the reform of agricultural policy; it requires a transformation of consciousness—a recognition of what the Buddhist tradition calls *shunyata* (emptiness) and what Shiva's ecofeminism calls the living principle: the understanding that no being is self-sufficient, that all life is gift, and that the appropriate response to gift is gratitude expressed in care.

The convergence of these traditions on the figure of the sacred feminine is not coincidental. It reflects a shared intuition that the separation of reason from nature, of self from world, of the productive from the reproductive, is not a discovery but an error—an error with catastrophic ecological consequences. The correction of this error is what the traditions examined in this paper variously call *dharma*, the Middle Way, the living economy, and the grammar of obligation. What they share is the conviction that ecological balance is not a technical achievement but a moral one: it is what happens when beings recognise and honour their constitutive interdependence.

VI. A Dharmic Ecology of Reading: Toward a Critical Practice

Having traced the convergences between Shiva's ecofeminism, Indigenous Indian ecological lores, and Buddhist philosophy, it remains to ask what implications these convergences hold for the practice of reading—for the discipline of literary and cultural studies in which this paper is situated. What would it mean to read with an awareness of ecological interdependence, of dharmic obligation, of dependent origination? And how might such a reading practice engage the urgent realities of ecological crisis without reducing literature and culture to mere symptom or solution?

The first principle of what I want to call a dharmic ecology of reading is attention to the non-human as agent and speaker. The texts that have circulated at the centre of the English literary tradition—from the Romantics to the modernists to the postcolonials—have generally assigned the non-human world the role of backdrop, symbol, or resource for human drama. The trees in Hardy's woodlands are primarily trees-as-symbols; the river in Conrad is primarily a river-as-moral-landscape. Ecocriticism, as a critical practice, has made considerable progress in challenging this anthropocentrism, but the challenge has often remained at the level of thematic critique: a demonstration that the natural world is present in the text, that it matters, that it has been misrepresented or undervalued. What a dharmic ecology of reading proposes is something more ontologically ambitious: a reading practice that is alert to the ways in which texts themselves embody or enact principles of interdependence, relationality, and obligation—or fail to do so.

The second principle is what I would call epistemic hospitality: the willingness to allow non-canonical, non-Western, and non-textual forms of ecological knowledge to challenge and enrich the analytical frameworks we bring to literary and cultural study. This is not a call for an uncritical celebration of Indigenous wisdom traditions, nor for a naive primitivism that romanticises the pre-modern. It is a call for the kind of rigorous, respectful, and self-critical engagement that Leela Gandhi describes as 'postcolonial love'—a willingness to be changed by encounter with the other, to allow one's own epistemological assumptions to be unsettled (Gandhi 9-12). The Santal *Jaher*, the Bishnoi precepts, the Gond mythology of *Dharti Mata*—these are not mere ethnographic data to be annexed to a Western environmental humanities; they are philosophical propositions about the nature of obligation, relationality, and ecological being that deserve to be engaged on their own terms.

The third principle is a commitment to what Shiva calls diversity: the recognition that ecological health and epistemological health are structurally analogous, that the monoculture of the mind that impoverishes the seed bank also impoverishes the library. A dharmic ecology of reading resists the canonising impulse that reduces the plurality of ecological knowledges to a single tradition—whether that tradition is deep ecology, Buddhist environmentalism, or the Hindu concept of *Prakriti*. It insists on the productivity of difference, on the creative tension between traditions that share broad orientations while diverging in their specific claims and practices.

The fourth principle is implication: the recognition that the reader is not outside the ecological crisis but within it, that the act of reading is itself an ecological act—performed in bodies sustained by food grown in soils, in rooms heated by energy extracted from the earth, in institutions whose carbon footprint is rarely acknowledged in their scholarly output. A dharmic ecology of reading does not pretend to resolve this contradiction, but it insists on holding it in consciousness, as the Buddhist tradition holds the first noble truth of *dukkha* in consciousness: not as paralysis but as the starting point for honest engagement. Ecological balance is not a condition that pre-existed human activity and can be restored by returning to a pristine nature. It is a practice, a continuous ethical achievement, that requires the full resources of human intelligence, compassion, and institutional will. The traditions examined in this paper—Shiva's ecofeminism, the Indigenous lores of the subcontinent, the Buddhist philosophy of interdependence—offer not a blueprint but a vocabulary: a set of concepts and practices through

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which human communities have historically oriented themselves toward the earth and toward one another in ways that sustained rather than depleted the conditions of life.

VII. Conclusion: The Dharma of the Living World

This essay has argued that ecological balance is best understood not as a biophysical condition to be managed but as a dharmic practice to be cultivated—a continuous ethical achievement rooted in the recognition of interdependence and expressed in the concrete obligations of care, restraint, and kinship. Drawing on Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist critique of maldevelopment, the Indigenous ecological traditions of the Indian subcontinent, and the Buddhist philosophical framework of dependent origination, it has traced a set of convergent insights across traditions that have developed largely independently of one another and that differ significantly in their metaphysical commitments and cultural contexts.

What these traditions share is more than coincidence. They share a fundamental intuition about the nature of life: that it is relational all the way down, that the self is not a substance but an event of mutual arising, and that the appropriate ethical response to this condition is not the assertion of rights over nature but the assumption of obligations toward it. Shiva calls this the living economy; the Santals call it the covenant of the Jaher; the Bishnoi call it the dharma of the twenty-nine precepts; Nagarjuna calls it the emptiness of intrinsic existence. Different vocabularies, different ontological frameworks, different historical formations—but a shared grammar of what it means to live rightly in a world constituted by interdependence.

The urgency of these arguments has not diminished. If anything, the deepening of the ecological crisis—the acceleration of species extinction, the fragmentation of forest corridors, the acidification of oceans, the impoverishment of soils—gives them a new and terrible relevance. The Olive Ridley turtles that return each year to the beaches of Odisha to nest, navigating by the magnetic memory of the earth, are not merely wildlife. They are, in the vocabulary this paper has attempted to assemble, dharmic presences: beings whose existence is entangled with the ecology of the Bay of Bengal, the fishing practices of the coastal communities, the light pollution of the developing shore, the temperature of seas warmed by a carbon economy they did not create. To speak of their protection is to speak of the protection of a relational event—a web of mutual arising that includes the turtles and the fishers and the mangroves and the monsoon and the scholars who write about them from the relative safety of their universities.

The dharma of the living world asks nothing less than that we recognise this entanglement and act accordingly. Literature and criticism, at their best, are among the practices through which human communities develop and refine their capacity for such recognition. The traditions examined in this paper—diverse, contested, and irreducible to one another—offer both the resources and the inspiration for that work.

Notes

1. The concept of Prakriti in Sankhya philosophy has a long and complex hermeneutic history. For a thorough philosophical treatment, see Gerald James Larson's *Classical Samkhya: An Interpretation of Its History and Meaning*. Shiva's appropriation of the concept is selective and strategic rather than strictly orthodox, and should be understood as a creative philosophical intervention rather than a scholarly exegesis.

2. Verrier Elwin's ethnographic work among the Gond and other central Indian communities, while invaluable as a documentary source, has been critically re-examined by contemporary scholars for its paternalistic assumptions. G.N. Devy's edited volume *A Nomad Called Thief* offers a more recent and methodologically self-aware engagement with Gond oral traditions.

3. The standard English translation of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* used in this essay is Jay Garfield's *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford UP, 1995), which provides both the Tibetan and Sanskrit texts alongside an analytical commentary that is particularly useful for cross-tradition comparison.

4. The relationship between engaged Buddhism and environmental activism has generated a substantial secondary literature. See particularly the essays collected in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Harvard UP, 1997).

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